



TRINITY EPISCOPAL CHURCH

on the Branford Green

May you find Christ, Community and Compassion within these historic walls.

The Lord's Prayer – A Gift from the Wilderness

By The Rev Sharon Gracen

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One could never accuse the author of the Gospel According to Mark of being overly wordy. He describes Jesus' desert experience in 34 words: "And the Spirit immediately drove him into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him." As with many things in the Bible, the real story lies between the words.

The story between these words comes to us in an unexpected way – the Lord's Prayer. I believe that the desert is the place that this prayer emerged for Jesus, so let us look at this prayer and peer between its words.

It's quite possible that the first word is the most important. "Our." Last year a friend sent me her reflections on this word and what had happened to her understanding of herself and God because of it. She wrote,

It's such a small word, but considering it in a new way, recently, rocked my world.

Within its meaning lie concepts of possession and plurality. The thing that is neither yours, nor mine -- but ours -- takes me out of my solitariness and connects me to some other or others.

"Our" has transformed Jesus for me into more than a symbol...more than the mystical phantom that my early religious training fashioned. He's the way out of the isolation of the human experience.

In this first word of this first and last prayer, I realize my best self by becoming part of the vast and profound and timeless communion that Jesus preached and made possible.

Our Father in heaven – hallowed, holy is your name. This whole phrase is intimate and grand at the same time. The Hebrew word *Abba* does not evoke a patriarchal power but a loving parent who would hold you near when you are hurt or frightened. *Abba* does not inspire fear but love. And at the same time we respond with awe at the intricacy, power, and elegance of the divinity that creates, surrounds and invades us. God is simultaneously comfortable and unfathomable.

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Your Kingdom and your will come on earth...as it all ready is in heaven. Jesus was aware that the world in his time was imperfect, broken and mean. Sadly, not much has changed. There is not more poignant plea to God than for suffering to end. The how is not specified in this prayer but it is found in the other teachings of the prophets and Jesus. It will come when we trust in God enough to give up our fearful human ways. It will come when we regard others with such kindness and compassion that we will no longer allow anything to harm them. The kingdom will come when we embrace the reality of "our."

Our daily bread...such a comforting image and yet her Jesus challenges us. First of all, there is that word again; it is not bread for you or for me, but for us all together. God's bread must be shared. The reference to daily bread actually comes from another desert experience. The Israelites, in fear of starvation, pray and they are answered with the bread from heaven – an odd hoarfrost like substance that fell during the night and every night after. They were instructed to gather only what they could prepare and eat for that day. Those who tried to take more than they could use found that it rotted. So when we pray for our daily bread, we are indeed asking for God's abundant generosity but we are also praying that we will not be greedy and take more than we need. We are praying that we will learn to control our consumption and hoarding tendencies so that there will always be enough for everyone. Daily bread teaches us trust and responsibility.

Forgive us our sins, the ways in which we have trespassed in the hearts and lives of others. The catch to this most necessary petition is the qualifier "as we have forgiven others." The little word "as" sits there in dangerous ambiguity. "As" can mean "when" and if we hear it that way then we are saying "please hold our forgiveness until we have done the work ourselves. Don't forgive us until we have forgiven the ones who have hurt us." "As" can also mean "to the same degree." And so we might be asking God to observe how completely we have forgiven and grant us forgiveness only to the same extent. Which ever interpretation you choose, please know that you are praying for conditional forgiveness. It all hinges on your willingness to forgive.

"Lead us not into temptation." Jesus had been there and didn't want us to have to go through such torment so he taught us pray for deliverance from such an experience. The Greek word that is so often translated "temptation" can also mean trial or testing, which is reflected in the newer interpretation of the Lord's Prayer that we sing for most of the year...save us from the time of trial. I cannot believe that it is good or even possible for us to go through life without temptation and trial which are really opportunities to build character. Surely, Jesus understood enough about the human spirit to understand our need for challenges but there are things from which we should all be spared – especially those things that harm the soul and spirit. The New Zealand Prayer Book's poetic Lord's Prayer gives us this interpretation, "from trials too great to endure, spare us." That feels right to me.

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This prayer that Jesus gave to his disciples is found only in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. Luke's version is minimalist. It is from Matthew that we draw our familiar version. Only Matthew gives us the desperate plea to be delivered from evil. This undefined evil could refer to many things but it is unlikely that Jesus was locating evil in a being such as the devil. There was and is plenty of evil in the world and the one who loved us unto his own death certainly wants us to be spared. However, a question lurks around such a petition – how do we stop being a part of the world's evil. Can we be delivered from our own complicity? Can we be delivered from the shame of standing by as genocides occur? Can we be delivered from judgment when our own ignorance and indifference insulates us from suffering and hardship in the confines in our own small state of Connecticut? Seen in this light, the petition to be delivered from evil might be understood as hoping to be delivered from our own human nature. This prayer is becoming more challenging all of the time.

And then we end with the dramatic, full voiced doxology – “For thine is the kingdom, the power and glory, forever and ever. Amen.” Such a wrap up is not found in the earliest known versions of Matthew but sneaks in years later. It is a paraphrase of a verse in 1 Chronicles “Yours, O LORD, is the greatness and the power and the glory and the majesty and the splendor, for everything in heaven and earth is yours. Yours is the kingdom, O LORD, and you are exalted as head over all.” The interesting thing about this grand observation of God's glory is that it is spoken by King David in response to passing the plate for the building of the Temple. The extravagant contributions by the leaders of the tribes and families of Israel, offerings of gold, silver, precious gems and other valuables were given with joy and excitement for what they were building. David continues on say “But who am I, and who are my people, that we should be able to give as generously as this? Everything comes from you, and we have given you only what comes from your hand.” So the Lord's Prayer ends with a reminder that all that we value, our treasure and our very selves, does not belong to us but has always belonged to God and is therefore meant to be dedicated to the things that God wants.

Through this prayer, may we become one, truly united. May we become a house for God's glory and an example of God's will here on earth. ForFrowever and ever, amen.

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